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11-2015

TEMPORALITIES IN ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK: DEALING WITH PAST AND FUTURE IN THE EUROPEAN CRISIS

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Recommended Citation

Knight, Daniel; Krause, Elizabeth; Narotzky, Susana E.; Kalo, Sofia; Maraj Grahame, Alyssa; Finley, Eleanor Marie; Bressan, Massimo; and Pine, Frances, "TEMPORALITIES IN ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK: DEALING WITH PAST AND FUTURE IN THE EUROPEAN CRISIS" (2015). *CHESS Conference Panels*. 1.
https://scholarworks.umass.edu/chess_panels/1

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Parts of this paper have been published in Knight, D. M. and C. Stewart. 2016. *Ethnographies of Austerity: Temporality, Crisis and Affect in Southern Europe. History and Anthropology, Volume 27, Issue 1, pp:1-18.*

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Discussion: Temporalities in Ethnographic Fieldwork:

Dealing with Past and Future in the European Crisis

This panel dealt with numerous temporal conundrums of living with – and conducting ethnographic research in – an era of economic crisis: it dealt with repetitive and fluid pasts, the paradoxes of failing and soaring economies sometimes operating side-by-side; the recurrence of pre-modern histories where there is a sense of ‘falling back through the vortex of time’, versus visions of utopian futures based on renegotiated social contracts and new technologies such as energy infrastructure. Of local people who have been dramatically torn from their time-line, kicked out into the abyss of temporal obscurity, falling into the cracks, the ruptures, of the usually unquestioned perception of linear time, a progression from a known past towards a ‘better’ easily-imagined future. We have stories of time moving slowly, as if the fiscal crisis has already lasted a lifetime, of time running backwards, its arrow inverted; of time repeating itself in a continuous loop, of time stalling, of the present becoming ‘uncanny’, elongated in suspended animation, all adding to the sense of temporal confusion and dizziness.

A theme arising strongly from the collection of papers is the idea that once promised futures are already past and that it is the younger generation who will suffer most from the current

conditions of austerity and neoliberal reform. Six years – at least – of crisis has left people feeling abandoned as they will never experience first-hand the long-term future which the current hardship is supposed to serve. Exhaustion after six years of crisis, apparently without respite anytime soon, has defeated imaginations of scenarios for a better future; interest in the post-apocalyptic is a bridge too far for exhausted people. Feelings of resignation and helplessness are expressed by both younger and older generations, the future has been firmly defeated and, importantly, there is no preparation for a future that the next generation can find. Older people know that they will not be around to live the post-apocalyptic future and exhausted youngsters have written themselves out of the future, which they see as overpoweringly based on distrust, contempt, apathy. This is particularly prominent in Susana's paper where she says that "the effort of making a living for young people in Southern Europe, is also the effort to create particular kinds of value that endure in one form or another, that are reliable through time".

"Remember the future" Eleanor's informants tell her. Frances' research participants say they have an "absolute inability to imagine any other future" apart from that based on long-extinct promises of the past. For Susana's people it is the "creeping hopelessness demobilizing younger generations" that strikes one in the heart. All this has led to the feeling that people are living in an uncanny present, as Rebecca Bryant has recently theorized. Bryant maintains that crisis represents a critical threshold outside of normal time. She argues that "at a time of crisis we acquire a sense that what we do in this present will be decisive for both the past and the future, giving to the present the status of a threshold". Crisis becomes such precisely because it brings the present into consciousness, creating an unusually overburdened perception of *present-ness* that makes it harder for people to

imagine their futures. The present becomes uncanny due to this social interrogation of the “now”, the emphasis on the now, and its usually unquestioned links between past, present and future. The weighty “edifice” of crisis crushes the foundations of the present, opening cracks of hazard and anxiety. People are caught in suspended animation, in the spin-cycle that leaves them struggling for temporal orientation.

(NOTE: the uncanny moment of delivering a conference paper – De Martino’s Crisis of Presence, on the wall looking back at oneself).

The uncanny present rears its head in a number of the papers presented here. For Frances it is the “the unsettling of the familiar” caused by changes in governmental regime and economic policy. Some of Frances’ informants seem to be stuck in a present that is located 30 years in the past, while others attempt to breach the considerable threshold by either tentatively embracing change or migrating. On the one hand, the ideology of socialism emphasised human value realised through labour, full employment, and a social contract between state and citizen. On the other, the ideology of capitalism emphasised individual responsibility, private ownership, and profit-driven business models, making the familiar strange and intensifying peoples’ perception of the moment of change. For Sofia, the road to the future is based on uncanny representations, distortions, of spaces and artifacts associated with an ideologically distant past. Bestsy and Massimo describe how the “temporal distance” between unemployed Italian sweater artisans and über-flexible Chinese garment workers has made previous similarities now seem strange, giving people the need to pause for thought about their trajectories towards the future in comparison with their neighbors. This stillness, the pause in time, the reflection on social circumstance can act like

a trap, dissembling any hope for the future catching people in the “temporal ricochets between past and future”.

Eleanor (Concise version!)

Eleanor paper dealing with the pressure for fiscally challenged governments to support controversial fracking energy initiatives highlights a growing concern that runs throughout southern European; namely that crisis-stricken nations are becoming easy prey to new extractive economics, based on principles that classically delineate the relationship between colonizer and colonized. Energy, Eleanor argues, is a new promised land for both prospectors and debt-burdened governments alike as it seems to answer government geopolitical concerns over “energy independence” as well as their financial preoccupations. But, in the case of fracking, this has brought about an obvious case of double-standards, with Germany and France saying “no thank you” to this potentially dangerous and relatively untested method of energy production that offers little benefit to the local communities enduring the environmental and health hazards of the extractive process.

Eleanor’s paper resonates with an aspect of my work in Greece where it is not the demonized minotaur of fracking that is perceived to be a neo-colonial exercise in economic (and resource) extraction, but the relatively “holier-than-thou” renewable energy technologies. Entering a sixth year of fiscal crisis, the Greek government, supported by the European Union, advocates renewable energy generation and export as a way to repay national debt and decrease deficit. Multinational investment in photovoltaic (solar) parks on

the Plain of Thessaly where I work is booming, with many impoverished farmers having ceased crop cultivation in favor of energy production, what they call “growing photovoltaics” on 25 to 50-year contracts to put “food on the table” for the immediate tomorrow. Yet energy generated on farmland rarely benefits the local community so people have resorted to burning illegally-sourced firewood, furniture and household waste to keep warm, meaning that renewable energy projects are viewed locally as new forms of extractive economy, harnessing local natural resources for the benefit of foreign corporations. The fact that solar power is a renewable, inexhaustible resource might seem to make it impossible to be plundered in the way that finite resources such as timber or oil might be, or be as controversial as fracking, but this is not how things are perceived in Greece today. As new forms of neoliberalization and eco-degradation take hold in the new South-within-the-North, the same ‘politics of life’ seen in the global South emerge on the fringes of Europe – all part of what Dominic Boyer has recently termed the ever-changing goal-posts of ‘energopolitics’.

Eleanor’s case and my experience of renewables in Greece, opens up a whole new set of temporal considerations: the accelerations, ruptures, and juxtapositions associated with environmental capacity, the needs of global financial markets, the loss of intergenerational skills sets associated with the land, feelings of dispossession and the uneasy need to provide for the immediate short-term future while sacrificing the long-term. Furthermore, with no mains gas supply and the price of petrol required for central heating dramatically increasing over the years of austerity, in Greece in winter 2013-14 people began using open-fires to heat their homes. Farmers comment that while they have “futuristic”, “ultra-modern”,

“European approved”, “high-tech”, “clean and green” photovoltaic panels on their land, they had turned to “archaic”, “pre-modern”, “unsustainable” energy solutions to heat their homes, causing substantial problems for the natural environment and public health.

(NOTE: The irony of protest camps producing renewable energy – my informants in Greece wouldn’t see this as the better alternative, especially with the unforeseen health and environmental consequences of solar and wind)

Frances, in her paper, argues that we can learn from the past and identify traits in seemingly disparate crises – both distant in time and space, be it in Socialist transitions at the end of the 1980s, the financial crisis in Argentina in 2001 (as Victoria Goddard suggests), or, might I add, more distant events such as the bankruptcy of the Ottoman Empire in the 1890s or --- as was argued in a panel yesterday --- the romanticisation of Medieval Europe and the fall of Chinese dynasties. Frances picks up on the disparate nature of learning from the past by discussing both immediate and long-term impacts of de-industrialization. And I love Marx’s comments that “history repeats itself the first time as tragedy, but the second time as farce”.

(NOTE: AND at this point I had my own temporal tragedy when my computer crashed without saving meaning that I had to delve 15 minutes back into the past to remember what I was writing! (and it was seminal, I promise)).

But why are we surprised that moments of the past are repeating themselves, resurfacing in the present to inform future trajectories? I would suggest that this surprise lies within our own uncritical western perspective of time as linear, flowing in one direction from a known

past to a promised future. But, as Charles Stewart has argued, Western historicism is “but one specific and recently developed principle ... with peculiar ideas about linear temporal succession, homogenous time units ... causation, and anachronism” (2012: 197). The Heraclitean view of time as continuously flowing in one direction is but one interpretation that may be at odds with local versions of invoking the past to create pools of inspiration from which local people create novel historicizations (2012: 203). Once the common western assumption of historicism is interrogated it should no longer be so surprising that there be an active synthesis or “scrambling” of moments, historical events that are condensed and compressed together to form meaningful narratives in the present. For Frances’ informants, bits of the past are brought into the present without an imaginable future. Their present is being lived in the pre-modern past.

SUSANA (Concise version of notes)

Susana explores issues of social mobilization and creative resistance in northern Spain, through the contemporary reworkings of the conditions of possibility leading to a better life during times of crisis, the different ties between past and future are re-imagined and the past is reinterpreted in the light of imaginable or unimaginable futures. Susana has written elsewhere (2011; Narotzky and Smith 2002) about the production of present political mobilizations in relation to particular memories of the past, rendering certain future-orientated actions legitimate while excluding others. In the present paper, Susana shows how people try to make sense of the present day economic crisis by referring to past experiences and imagining possible futures, connecting local pasts of mobilizations to the breakdown of the welfare state that the crisis is dispossessing and the attempts of local people to create a viable future. Her informants refer to history (a historical consciousness)

as a constructed and structured account of a causal nature where agency and collective solidarities are paramount and need to be recuperated in order to preserve the “conquests” of past struggle and to be able to produce futures for younger generations. Past and present inform the older generations to produce an “endless pedagogy of struggle” linked to a linear past, while younger groups are living in a present that is filled with multiple solid first-hand experiences, which I suggest is a reconstituted assemblage of disparate past endeavors, even if they younger people do not explicitly recognize this. They have very short-term activist targets. Susana identifies the mismatch in expectations in what older and younger generations expect from the future.

Interestingly, Susana notes how life-projects have changed in Spain since the outbreak of crisis, alluding to how people deal with renegotiated (almost certainly uncanny) presents by living in their pasts – most notably in a physical manner by returning to live with their parents and grandparents, becoming what her informants term “internal refugees”. The transformation of life-projects since the onset of economic turmoil brings attention to the pace of life in Spain which can be separated into long-term/ short-term decision making processes, echoing voices across southern Europe post-2008 who state that they feel that their lives have “regressed” in every imaginable social and material way. For Susana’s informants, their futures are not mere geometrical extensions of time but, in Rosenberg and Harding’s (2005: 3-5) words, “junkyards” filled with past aspirations that continue to “haunt” contemporary lives, providing “morality tales” for the present.

Betsy and Massimo chart the times and tempos of manufacturing in an Italian city, the so-called “work rhythms”. The tangible ethnographic picture they paint of a neighbourhood in

conflict – spatially, temporally, sometimes physically. While reading their description of the desolate space I found myself whole-heartedly thrown into the fangs of the waiting bear-trap that is “affect”. But I don’t intend to dwell there too long, instead I was intrigued by the nature of the border or frontier region where opposing temporalities meet. One can think of this in terms of the frontiers of great Empires, religious quests or the mismatches of sovereign state and European Union bureaucracy, for example. In that sense, the city of Prato, like much of the European south since the crisis, has become “a laboratory of globalization and crisis”, the play-ground for neo-liberal, neo-colonial and extractive activities, as Eleanor discussed. I found the struggles of the city council to find policy to accommodate different temporalities particularly interesting, it reminded me of the different, often conflicting rhythms involved in when new social policies get caught in the space between ideological or, to use Benjamin’s words, “Messianic”, and bureaucratic or structural time. So there is a temporal conflict in the very way that the City is trying to resolve a temporal conflict!

(NOTE: the recurrence of land and spatial disputes and an ongoing theme in the papers).

Sofia

Sofia shows us how art can be used as a capsule to capture and promote modernity and Europeaness. The transformation of public spaces in former socialist countries has attracted much scholarly attention – Rozita Dimova’s work on Skopje kitsch, Catherine Wanner’s suggestion that public monuments carry an affective register to direct people into particular ways of thinking and feeling about their past and future paths. Sofia argues that the ‘spectacles’ of public art reflect some familiar legacies of socialist-era techniques of rule, namely the merging of intellectual and political work to the proclaimed end of advancing

Albanian society. The new installations almost ironically critique the past, tongue in check, allowing memories of the socialist past to be digested in a setting that is, on the one hand, spatially intimate (bunker, minister's home), but on the other, somewhat distorted. Such underlying irony can be found in abundance in crisis situations, as people seek to challenge dangerous or controversial topics by slightly obscuring their line of critique. Through irony, often pinned to historically important moments and drawing on culturally important tropes, people can capture national attitudes toward the government's current programmes, visions of the future, perform solidarity, and bring silenced pasts into the public domain. Finally, Sofia gives us another paradox: the spectacles, she argues produce an illusion of movement, change and progress, while relying on socialist-era methods of control: namely a monopolization of cultural production in the service of the politics of the government.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, this collection of papers successfully brought our attention to how the economic crisis in Europe has stimulated temporal thought (temporality), whether tilted in the direction of historicising, presentifying, or futural thought, provoking people to rethink their relationship to time. The studies of actually living with austerity identify the ways the past may be activated, lived, embodied, and re-fashioned under contracting economic horizons. The empirical study of crisis captures the decisions or non-decisions that people make, and the actual temporal processes by which they judge responses. I would lay down the challenge to the presenters to think about how modern linear historicism is often overridden in such moments by modes of temporalizing and historicizing. In crises, not only

time, but history itself as an organising structure and set of expectations, is up for grabs and can be refashioned according to new rules.